

Pittsburgh Action Against Rape

Fact sheet on survivors with cognitive impairments

What is a cognitive impairment?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines a cognitive disability as a 'disorder in which one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, think, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations'. The effects of this disability range from minor, having little to no effect on the person's daily life, to extensive impairments that severely limit an individual's ability to function independently. A main barrier that individuals with cognitive disabilities face is an information-processing deficit. This deficit affects the individual's ability to store, process or recall information. A person who has a cognitive disability may also demonstrate below average learning and social skills and may have limited vocabulary or difficulties with speech.

When providing services to someone who has a cognitive impairment:

- ◆ Difficulties in cognitive processing may manifest in a person's behaviors, in addition to the impaired use of spoken or written language. These behaviors can range from being very disruptive and inappropriate to extremely compliant and eager to please.
- ◆ People with cognitive disabilities may not have learned appropriate social skills or behaviors. Part of the treatment may include teaching about personal boundaries and social skills.
- ◆ It is important to establish a trusting relationship and be careful not to ask questions in a leading way. The use of a structured interview protocol when interviewing and assessing clients with cognitive disabilities who have been victimized helps to strengthen and clarify the client's and workers understanding of the situation.
- ◆ Structure, order and predictability can help a person with a cognitive disability to feel safe. The presence of a familiar support person can feel soothing, although it is important to assess whether the support person is safe.
- ◆ Some people with cognitive impairments may find that taking frequent short breaks is helpful to process and remember information from a meeting or session.

- ◆ Many people with cognitive disabilities find it difficult to generalize and apply information. This difficulty can lead to a client's story being fragmented and not comprehensive. Teaching violence prevention can therefore be lengthy and require highly concrete information and extensive opportunities to practice.
- ◆ It can take longer to complete an interview or accomplish a task. Sometimes it is helpful to allot additional time or schedule additional meetings.
- ◆ Ask your client if it would be helpful to read forms and print materials aloud and complete them together to ensure that he/she fully understands the information.
- ◆ Although your client may act childlike, it is important to remember their biological age and treat them accordingly.

For more information regarding cognitive impairments, please visit
<http://www.cpa.ca/factsheets/cognitive.htm>

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